

An Introduction to Research Techniques

A research paper will prove a result, cause, effect or an outcome dealing with your topic. Your proof will be the results of your investigations on a selected topic. Based on your own thoughts and the facts and ideas you have gathered from a variety of sources, a research paper is a creation that is uniquely yours. The experience of gathering, interpreting, and documenting information, developing and organizing ideas and conclusions, and communicating them clearly will prove to be an important and satisfying part of your education.

This handout outlines the logical steps to writing a good research paper. To achieve supreme excellence or perfection in anything you do, you need more than just the knowledge. Like the Olympic athlete aiming for the gold medal, you must have a positive attitude and the belief that you have the ability to achieve it. That is the real start to writing an A+ research paper.

STEP 1. CHOOSE A TOPIC

Choose a topic that interests and challenges you. Your attitude towards the topic may well determine the amount of effort and enthusiasm you put into your research.

Focus on a limited aspect, e.g. narrow it down from "Religion" to "World Religion" to "Buddhism". Obtain teacher approval for your topic before embarking on a full-scale research. If you are uncertain as to what is expected of you in completing the assignment or project, re-read your assignment sheet carefully or ASK your teacher.

Select a subject you can manage. Avoid subjects that are too technical, learned, or specialized. Avoid topics that have only a very narrow range of source materials.

STEP 2. FIND INFORMATION

Choose credible resources (Librarian presentation). Make sure you read your sources thoroughly and ensure you are finding an appropriate number (6-7) of sources to read. Do not limit yourself to just two or three sources.

STEP 3. STATE YOUR THESIS

Do some critical thinking and write your thesis statement down in one sentence. Your thesis statement is like a declaration of your belief. The main portion of your research paper will consist of arguments to support and defend this belief.

STEP 4. MAKE A TENTATIVE OUTLINE

Organize your thoughts and research logically. Figure out the best order to present your information to prove your point and jot down the sequence.

STEP 5. ORGANIZE YOUR NOTES

Pick out the best information and proofs that will prove your point and order it according to your outline so the information is easily available to you when you begin writing your rough draft

STEP 6. WRITE YOUR FIRST DRAFT

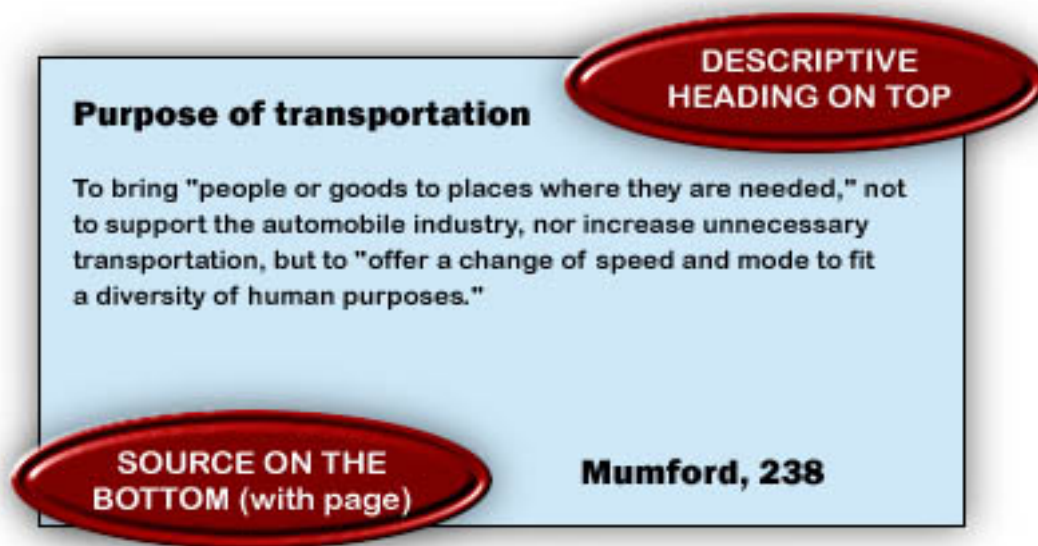
Don't be afraid to make changes in the order of your outline if what you are writing makes more sense. It is a rough draft and things can change.

STEP 7. REVISE YOUR OUTLINE AND DRAFT

Be sure to follow all formatting rules for the first page, in-text documentation, and Works Cited page (see MLA document) as well as all grammar rules for writing.

Taking Notes

As you examine each source, make a separate note of each fact or quotation you might want to use in your paper. Unless you are really good at manipulating text with your computer or laptop, it might be wise to use index cards when preparing notes. Be sure to identify the source of the information on the listing (include the author's name and page number on which the information appears). Try to summarize the information in your own words (paraphrasing); use quotation marks if you copy the information exactly. (This rule should apply whether you are copying a great deal of material or only a phrase.) Give each listing a simple descriptive heading.



Your listings — whether they appear on index cards, notebook paper or within some format on your computer — will now provide the authoritative basis for your paper's content and documentation. By arranging and rearranging the listings and using your descriptive headings, you may well discover a certain order or different categories that will help you prepare an outline. You may find that you need additional information, or that some of the listings may not be appropriate and should be set aside or discarded.

A Statement on Plagiarism

Using someone else's ideas or phrasing and representing those ideas or phrasing as our own, either on purpose or through carelessness, is a serious offense known as plagiarism. "Ideas or phrasing" includes written or spoken material, of course — from whole papers and paragraphs to sentences, and, indeed, phrases — but it also includes statistics, lab results, art work, etc. "Someone else" can mean a professional source, such as a published writer or critic in a book, magazine, encyclopedia, or journal; an electronic resource such as material we discover on the World Wide Web; another student at our school or anywhere else; a paper-writing "service" (online or otherwise) which offers to sell written papers for a fee.

Let us suppose, for example, that we're doing a paper for Music Appreciation on the child prodigy years of the composer and pianist Franz Liszt and that we've read about the development of the young artist in several sources. In Alan Walker's book *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years* (Ithaca: 1983), we read that Liszt's father encouraged him, at age six, to play the piano from memory, to sight-read music and, above all, to improvise. We can report in our paper (and in our own words) that Liszt was probably the most gifted of the child prodigies making their mark in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century — because that is the kind of information we could have gotten from a number of sources; it has become what we call common knowledge.

However, if we report on the boy's father's role in the prodigy's development, we should give proper credit to Alan Walker. We could write, for instance, the following: **Franz Liszt's father encouraged him, as early as age six, to practice skills which later served him as an internationally recognized prodigy (Walker 59).** Or, we could write something like this: **Alan Walker notes that, under the tutelage of his father, Franz Liszt began work in earnest on his piano playing at the age of six (59).** Not to give Walker credit for this important information is plagiarism.

Some More Examples

The original text from Elaine Tyler May's "Myths and Realities of the American Family" reads as follows:

Because women's wages often continue to reflect the fiction that men earn the family wage, single mothers rarely earn enough to support themselves and their children adequately. And because work is still organized around the assumption that mothers stay home with children, even though few mothers can afford to do so, child-care facilities in the United States remain woefully inadequate.

Here are some possible uses of this text. As you read through each version, try to decide if it is a legitimate use of May's text or a plagiarism.

Version A:

Since women's wages often continue to reflect the mistaken notion that men are the main wage earners in the family, single mothers rarely make enough to support themselves and their children very well. Also, because work is still based on the assumption that mothers stay home with children, facilities for childcare remain woefully inadequate in the United States.

Plagiarism: In Version A there is too much direct borrowing of sentence structure and wording. The writer changes some words, drops one phrase, and adds some new language, but the overall text closely resembles May's. Even with a citation, the writer is still plagiarizing because the lack of quotation marks indicates that Version A is a paraphrase, and should thus be in the writer's own language.

Version B:

As Elaine Tyler May points out, "women's wages often continue to reflect the fiction that men earn the family wage" (588). Thus many single mothers cannot support themselves and their children adequately. Furthermore, since work is based on the assumption that mothers stay home with children, facilities for day care in this country are still "woefully inadequate." (May 589).

Plagiarism: The writer now cites May, so we're closer to telling the truth about the relationship of our text to the source, but this text continues to borrow too much language.

Version C:

By and large, our economy still operates on the mistaken notion that men are the main breadwinners in the family. Thus, women continue to earn lower wages than men. This means, in effect, that many single mothers cannot earn a decent living. Furthermore, adequate day care is not available in the United States because of the mistaken assumption that mothers remain at home with their children.

Plagiarism: Version C shows good paraphrasing of wording and sentence structure, but May's original ideas are not acknowledged. Some of May's points are common knowledge (women earn less than men, many single mothers live in poverty), but May uses this common knowledge to make a specific and original point and her original conception of this idea is not acknowledged.

Version D:

Women today still earn less than men — so much less that many single mothers and their children live near or below the poverty line. Elaine Tyler May argues that this situation stems in part from "the fiction that men earn the family wage" (588). May further suggests that the American workplace still operates on the assumption that mothers with children stay home to care for them (589).

This assumption does not have the force it once did.

No Plagiarism: The writer makes use of the common knowledge in May's work, but acknowledges May's original conclusion and does not try to pass it off as his or her own. The quotation is properly cited, as is a later paraphrase of another of May's ideas.

Penalty for Plagiarism

The penalty for plagiarism at Parkland High School is death by firing squad. No, just kidding. The student will receive a 0 for the paper and their name will be given to the administration for punitive action. Plagiarism is an offense that will stay on your permanent record at Parkland and can affect your acceptance to college. Ignorance of the rules about plagiarism is no excuse, and carelessness is just as bad as purposeful violation. At the very least, however, students who plagiarize have cheated themselves out of the experience of being responsible members of the academic community and have cheated their classmates by pretending to contribute something original which is, in fact, a cheap copy.

Students who do not thoroughly understand the concept of plagiarism and methods of proper documentation should request assistance from their teacher and from librarians.

1. Document Settings

Your word processor comes with default settings (margin, line height, paragraph spacing, and typeface) that will likely need adjustment. For MLA style, you need:

1. 1-inch margins all around
2. 2.0 line height (double-spaced)
3. no extra spacing after paragraphs
4. 12-point typeface (usually Times New Roman)

Adjusting Document Settings in MS-Word (Windows)

My copy of Microsoft Word for Windows defaults to

1. 1-inch margins all around
2. 1.15 line height
3. 10pt spacing between paragraphs
4. Calibri 11-point typeface.

Changing to MLA Style (Windows)

1. The default margins in my test run were fine, but if you need to change them:
Page Layout -> Margins -> Normal (1-inch all around)
2. The default line height is too low. Change it to 2.0.
Home -> Line Spacing -> 2.0.
(You could try fudging it to 1.9 or 2.1 to meet a page count, but any more than that and your instructor may notice.)
3. The MS-Word default adds extra space after paragraphs.(MLA Style instead requires you to signal paragraph breaks by indenting the first line.)
CTRL-A (select all your text)
Home -> Line Spacing -> Remove Space After Paragraph
4. Change the typeface to Times New Roman 12-point.
Home -> Font Face Selector (change to Times New Roman)
Home -> Font Size Selector (change to 12)

Adjusting Document Settings in MS-Word (Mac)

My copy of Microsoft Word for Mac defaults to

1. 1.25 inch left and right margins, 1 inch top and bottom
2. 1.0 line height
3. no extra spacing after paragraphs
4. Cambria 12-point typeface

Changing to MLA style (Mac)

1. In my test run, the left and right margins are too big. To change them:
Layout -> Margins -> Normal (1-inch all around)
2. The default line height is too low. Change it to 2.0.
Home -> Line Spacing -> 2.0
3. My Mac copy of MS-Word does not add extra spaces after paragraphs. If yours does:
Home -> Line Spacing -> Line Spacing Options... (a new window will pop up)
Don't add space between paragraphs of the same style (check this box) -> **OK**
4. The 12-point Cambria will probably be fine, but to change the typeface:
Home -> Font Face Selector (change to Times New Roman)
Home -> Font Size Selector (change to 12)

2. Page Header

In the top right of every page, use your word processor's "Page Header" function add an automatic page number and your surname.

Adding the Page Header in MS-Word (Windows)

1. **Insert -> Page Number -> Top of Page ->** (choose the right-justified "Plain Number" option)
2. The cursor will jump automatically to the right place for you to **type your surname**.
3. Click anywhere in the body of the paper to exit the header area.

Adding the Page Header in MS-Word (Mac)

1. **Insert** (in the top menu) -> **Page Numbers...** -> (Set "Position" to "Top of Page (header)" and "Alignment" to "Right")
2. Click **just to the left** of the new page number, and **type your surname**.
3. On my test document, my name was too far over to the left; **grab the triangular tab adjuster** just above your name, and **drag it a notch to the right**.

3. Title Block

In the upper left corner, type your name, your instructor's name, the course number and section, and today's date. Centered on the next line, type an informative title that actually informs the reader of your main point (not just "English Paper" or "A Comparison between Hamlet and Macbeth").

Paige Rider

Professor S. A. Marker

English 101

3 April 2011

How College Writing Differs from High School:

Essays that Welcome Uncertainty and Seek out Debates Lead to True Growth

In high school, teachers who asked me to write personal essays or expository papers typically rewarded what Smith describes as "the emotions and knowledge

- Like all the other text in an MLA style paper, the **title block is double-spaced**.
- The **title is in the same font** as the rest of the paper — it is not boldface, or enlarged.
- There is **no extra space above or below** the title.
- A truly informative title will include **the general topic, and your precise opinion** on that topic. (So, if you plan to compare Hamlet and Macbeth, your title should state the unique point you want to make about Hamlet and Macbeth. Reuse part of your thesis statement.)

Your Research Paper's Format

Recommendations here are based on the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. It is important to note, however, that individual instructors and institutions or departments may vary from these recommendations somewhat and that it is always wise to consult with your instructor before formatting and submitting your work.

Paper:

Use white, twenty-pound, 8 1/2- by 11-inch paper. Erasable paper tends to smudge and should be avoided for a final draft. If you prefer to use erasable paper in the preparation of your paper, submit a good photocopy to your instructor.

Margins:

Except for page numbers (see below), leave one-inch margins all around the text of your paper -- left side, right side, and top and bottom. Paragraphs should be indented half an inch; set-off quotations should be indented an inch from the left margin (five spaces and ten spaces, respectively, on standard typewriters).

Spacing:

The *MLA Guide* says that "the research paper must be double-spaced," including quotations, notes, and the list of works cited.

Heading and Title:

Your research paper does not need a title page. At the top of the first page, at the left-hand margin, type your name, your instructor's name, the course name and number, and the date -- all on separate, double-spaced lines. Then double-space again and center the title above your text. (If your title requires more than one line, double-space between the lines.) Double-space again before beginning your text. The title should be neither underlined nor written in all capital letters. Capitalize only the first, last, and principal words of the title. Titles might end with a question mark or an exclamation mark if that is appropriate, but not in a period. Titles written in other languages are capitalized and punctuated according to different rules, and writers should consult the *MLA Guide* or their instructors.

Page Numbers:

Number your pages consecutively throughout the manuscript (including the first page) in the upper right-hand corner of each page, one-half inch from the top. Type your last name before the page number. Most word processing programs provide for a "running head," which you can set up as you create the format for the paper, at the same time you are establishing things like the one-inch margins and the double-spacing. This feature makes the appearance and consistency of the page numbering a great convenience. Make sure the page-number is always an inch from the right-hand edge of the paper (flush with the right-hand margin of your text) and that there is a double-space between the page number and the top line of text. Do not use the abbreviation *p.* or any other mark before the page number.

